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THE RELIGION OF THOMAS JEFFERSON

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THE RELIGION OF THOMAS JEFFERSON

BY HENRY WILDER FOOTE

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Thomas Jefferson: Champion of Religious Freedom Advocate of Christian Morals

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To my Wife
whose enthusiasm warmed and brightened
the happy labors
of our sojourn in Virginia

Henry Wilder Foote was born in Boston in 1875. He attended Roxbury Latin School and was graduated from Harvard College with an A.B. in 1897. He received an A.M. from the Harvard Graduate School in 1900 and an S.T.B. from Harvard Divinity School in 1902. His long and illustrious career as a Unitarian minister began that year with his ordination in King's Chapel. He served as minister in New Orleans, La. (1902-1906), Ann Arbor, Mich. (1906-1910), Belmont, Mass. (1925-1940), and, after his retirement, as interim minister in Syracuse, N. Y. and in Vancouver, B.C. From 1910 to 1913 he was Secretary of the Department of Education of American Unitarian Association and from 1913 until 1924 was Assistant to the Dean and Assistant Professor of Homiletics at the Harvard Divinity School. In 1943 he became the first minister of the newly organized church in Charlottesville, Va. Dr. Foote holds honorary degrees from Pacific Unitarian School for the Ministry, Meadville Theological School, and Calvin Coolidge College.

It was during Dr. Foote's stay in Charlottesville that he had opportunity to examine the career of Thomas Jefferson at close quarters. This and his abiding interest in American Colonial history led him to write about Jefferson's life with deep understanding and high historical scholarship. He is the author of THREE CENTURIES OF AMERICAN HYMNODY, THE RELIGION OF AN INQUIRING MIND, ROBERT FEKE: COLONIAL PORTRAIT PAINTER, and JOHN SMIBERT: PAINTER as well as numerous other pamphlets and essays.

PREFACE

THE Thomas Jefferson bibliography is enormous, and though he wrote but one book, *Notes on Virginia,* 1781, his state papers and his prodigious correspondence fill many volumes. The chief edition is *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,* edited by Lipscomb and Bergh in twenty volumes, Washington, 1903. Since most of the quotations in this essay are taken from that edition, the reference is indicated only by figures giving volume and page, e.g., the reference for his letter of April 21, 1803, to Benjamin Rush is given as 10:379-85, meaning volume 10, pages 379-85 in this edition. Paul Leicester Ford had previously edited a collection in 12 volumes, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson,* G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1892-99. Quotations from this source are indicated by the letter F preceding the figures giving volume and page.

Many quotations from both editions are to be found in Bernard Mayo's single volume of excellently chosen and carefully annotated selections from Jefferson's writings entitled *Jefferson Himself,* Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1942. *The Living Thoughts of Thomas Jefferson,* presented by John Dewey, Longmans Green & Co., New York, 1940, has a good introduction by Professor Dewey and a useful, but limited, selection from Jefferson's writings, grouped topically, but it is badly edited, having no table of contents or index and very inadequate references to sources.

Jefferson's opinions on religion and social reform

are referred to and in some measure discussed in Adrienne Koch's *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*, Columbia University Press, 1943. Jefferson's views on religion have been presented, not very coherently, by J. Leslie Hall in an article on "The Religious Opinions of Thomas Jefferson" printed in *The Sewanee Review*, vol. XXI, No. 2, April, 1913, and by William D. Gould in an article with the same title in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. XX, 1933.

I am indebted to all these editors and writers, but have sought to present Jefferson's views on religion in a more logical sequence of development than any of them have done, and have reached conclusions in some respects different from theirs. I have not attempted to search out every reference to religion and ethics in the immense body of Jefferson's writings. Instead I have endeavored to select those passages which best represent his thought. Parallels to many of them are to be found in documents and letters not quoted.

H. W. F.

Cambridge, Mass.
March, 1947

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THE RELIGION OF THOMAS JEFFERSON

1743 April 13 (April 2, old style), born at Shadwell, Va.
1760 Entered William and Mary College, Williamsburg, Va.
1762 Entered law office of George Wythe
1764 Admitted to the bar
1769 Elected to the House of Burgesses
1771 Began erection of the mansion at Monticello
1772 Married Martha Wayles Skelton
1776 Drafted the Declaration of Independence
1777 Drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom
1779 Elected Governor of Virginia; re-elected 1780
1781 Wrote *Notes on Virginia*
1782 Mrs. Jefferson died
1783 Delegate to the Continental Congress. Drafted plan for decimal system of coinage (dollars and cents) adopted 1784
1784 Drafted Ordinance of 1784, providing for admission of new states to the Union: sailed for France as minister plenipotentiary
1786 Statute for Religious Freedom passed by the Virginia legislature
1789 Returned from France
1790-1793 Secretary of State under Washington
1796 Elected Vice-President
1800 Elected President; re-elected 1804
1809 Retired to Monticello at end of his second term on March 4
1816 Began plans for the proposed University of Virginia
1818 The University established by the Virginia legislature
1819 Site of University chosen at Charlottesville; Jefferson elected Rector
1825 The University opened
1826 July 4, Jefferson died at Monticello

Jefferson's Religious Background

THOMAS JEFFERSON is rated by historians as one of the greatest of American presidents, only a little below Washington and Lincoln in the importance of his services to his country, yet in his own day his character and his policies were the objects of bitter attacks, the echoes of which are still sometimes heard. His opinions regarding religion, in particular, have long been subject to much misunderstanding and dispute. On the one hand he has been acclaimed an Episcopalian because of his early formal connection with that church; on the other he has been widely denounced as an infidel or an atheist, and his writings were regarded as so dangerous that as late as 1830 the public library in Philadelphia refused to admit them to the shelves.[1] His well-known disbelief in the dogmas of orthodox Christianity, dating from his early manhood, and his long and successful fight in Virginia for religious freedom, led conservative churchmen, especially in the states where tax-supported church establishments still existed, to regard him as an enemy of Christianity. But he had the enthusiastic support of the greater part of other religious groups,

[1] Howard Mumford Jones, *America and French Culture, 1750-1848*, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1927, pp. 395-6.

particularly the Baptists and Methodists, who sought deliverance from the domination of any ecclesiastical standing order. Others, again, have supposed him to be so indifferent to religion as to have given it little thought, because he steadfastly refused to enter into any public discussion on the subject, holding that his beliefs were his own private concern, and adopting Locke's maxim, "The care of every man's soul belongs to himself," as a necessary corollary to his belief in religious freedom.

Yet his own writings and way of life reveal him not only as a champion of religious freedom but also as an advocate of Christian morals. In April, 1803, he wrote to Benjamin Rush, "My views . . . are the result of a life of inquiry and reflection, and are very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of Christianity I am, indeed, opposed, but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian in the only sense in which I believe Jesus wished anyone to be, sincerely attached to his doctrines in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence, and believing that he never claimed any other."[2]

His father, Peter Jefferson, a few years before the birth of Thomas in 1743, had acquired a large area of land and had built a house at Shadwell, some eight miles east of the present city of Charlottesville, on what was then the pioneering frontier of Virginia. Peter Jef-

[2] 10:379-85.

ferson was an intelligent and capable man, self-educated and prosperous, a public surveyor and a colonel in the militia, though he did not come from one of "the first families of Virginia." On his father's side Thomas Jefferson could trace his ancestry no further than to his grandfather. His mother, Jane Randolph, however, was descended from one of the oldest and most distinguished families in the colony, of which he wrote, "They trace their pedigree far back in England and Scotland, to which let everyone ascribe the faith and merit he chooses." Thomas Jefferson thus united in his own person the two diverse and rival strains conspicuous in the Virginia of his day. He had both the independent, liberty-loving, aggressive spirit of the westward-pushing pioneer, which found expression in his political and social views, and the cultural inheritance of the great landed families of the eastern tidewater, which flowered in his amazingly wide intellectual and artistic interests.

It was to be expected that a youth of his social status in Virginia should be brought up as at least a nominal adherent to the Anglican Church, which had been, from the founding of the colony, the established and tax-supported form of religion. Although no record of his baptism has been found, the presumption that he was baptized by an Anglican clergyman amounts to almost a certainty. At the time of his birth, and for many years later, there was no church building of any denomination in the immediate vicinity of Shadwell, but territorial parishes of the established church were organized as the frontier was settled. Thus the parish of

Fredericksville was set up in 1742, embracing that part of Albemarle County which now includes Charlottesville. When missionary clergymen occasionally visited the new settlements and held services in private houses the Jeffersons were frequently their hosts. It may be assumed that on one such occasion the infant Thomas was baptized. Although it is improbable that he was ever confirmed, it was a matter of course that an Anglican clergyman should have performed the marriage service uniting Jefferson to his wife. In fact only such were then authorized to conduct marriages in the colony. It is also probable that the children of this marriage were baptized in due time.

Both Peter Jefferson and his son Thomas are recorded as having been elected vestrymen. Such an election at that time had little significance beyond indicating the social status of the family. Educated men were few, owing to the almost complete lack of schools. Only those youths were educated whose parents could afford either to send them to England or to employ private tutors to prepare them for William and Mary College in Williamsburg, the sole source of formal education for a very limited number of the ruling class. The position of vestryman in the established church was the prerogative, or the social obligation, of these few educated members of the landed gentry, with small regard to their personal convictions or even their way of life. As Bishop Meade wrote, nearly a century later, "Even Mr. Jefferson, and Wythe, who did not conceal their disbelief in Christianity, took their parts in the

duties of vestrymen, the one [Wythe] at Williamsburg, the other [Jefferson] at Albemarle; for they wished to be men of influence."[3] But, referring to Jefferson's election at a later date as vestryman of St. Anne's Parish after his removal to Monticello, he adds that "it does not appear that he ever acted."[4]

After Jefferson's retirement from the presidency to the famous mansion which he had built at Monticello, five miles nearer to Charlottesville than the house at Shadwell which had burned down in 1770, he frequently attended the union services of worship conducted in the Court House. He "used to bring his seat with him on horseback from Monticello, it being some light machinery which, folded up, was carried under his arm, and unfolded served for a chair."[5] The religious practices of the community, as he had long known them, were pictured by Jefferson himself less than four years before his death, in a letter to Dr. Thomas Cooper, Nov. 2, 1822. "In our village of Charlottesville there is a good deal of religion, with

[3] This "explanation" is an amazing piece of condescension. Even before the Revolution, Wythe and Jefferson were two of the most influential men in the Colony. If they accepted election as vestrymen it was as a simple act of courtesy to their neighbors. It is perhaps more likely that they were elected without having been previously consulted, because they were men of influence.

[4] William Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia*, Philadelphia, 1857, I, 191, II, 49.

[5] *Ibid.*, II, 52

only a small spice of fanaticism. We have four sects, but without either church or meeting house. The court house is the common temple, one Sunday in the month to each. Here Episcopalian and Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist, meet together, join in hymning their Maker, listen with attention and devotion to each other's preachers and all mix in society with perfect harmony."[6] Tradition says that he preferred the metrical psalms to hymns, and that when the Episcopal service was held he brought his own prayer book.

In his Account Book, under the date of March 8, 1824, seventeen months before his death, is the entry, "I have subscribed to the building of an Episcopal church, two hundred dollars; a Presbyterian, sixty dollars; and a Baptist, twenty-five dollars."[7] The Episcopal house of worship was Christ Church, erected about that time, for which he is reputed to have drawn the plans. It was quite natural that he should have been asked to do so, for he was the most distinguished architect in the Commonwealth. He had drawn the plans for the State Capitol in Richmond, and for the incomparable buildings of the University of Virginia, as well as for his own house at Monticello, and for houses of his friends. Unfortunately the only extant pictures of the original Christ Church are too small and inadequate to give any good idea of its appearance. The exterior shows a columned portico and low belfry in the Georgian style; the interior was rectangular and bare;

[6] 15:404.

[7] Ms. Account Book, New York Historical Society.

the building apparently did not exhibit any distinctive marks of Jefferson's architectural genius. If Jefferson, then about 83 and deeply engrossed with building the University, did draw the design, it was probably no more than a slight sketch which has not been preserved. When the original building was torn down, about 1895, to make way for the present very different stone Gothic church, it had long been regarded as inadequate and out of date, and there was apparently no sentiment for its preservation as a sample of Jefferson's skill as an architect.

But although Jefferson had the ancestral and social ties with the Episcopal Church indicated above, and took a neighborly interest in the welfare of the local parish, as in that of other religious groups in the community, he was far from accepting its creed and doctrines. He had turned away from them in early manhood and he never reverted to them.

Jefferson's Student Days

When Jefferson entered William and Mary College in the spring of 1760, at the age of seventeen, he was gifted with a vigorous body; with a pleasing personality which made him acceptable in society; and with great intellectual curiosity in almost every field of knowledge then open, except metaphysics. Furthermore, he was an ambitious and hard-working student. In Williamsburg he at once came under the influence of three outstanding men, Professor William Small, George Wythe, and Governor Francis Fauquier. Small was an English mathematician and scientist whose teaching developed Jefferson's great interest and ability in those fields manifested throughout his life. Wythe was a self-educated but scholarly lawyer, well-read in the classics, a follower of Locke and an ardent advocate of liberal political and social ideas with which he inspired not only Jefferson, but most of the others in that small but remarkable group of leaders in the Revolutionary generation in Virginia. Fauquier was a popular and able Governor, a Fellow of the Royal Society, who wrote on economic and scientific subjects, and who was a musician, wit, and man of the world. Jefferson played the fiddle well enough to take part in the amateur concerts at the Governor's palace and thus laid the foundation for his lifelong love of music.

These three older men were in the habit of dining

together frequently in the palace and they soon invited young Jefferson to become a fourth member of their party. The smallness of the College and the community made easier such intimate associations of a student with his elders, but they would never have developed if the older men had not recognized Jefferson as a youth of exceptional promise. To these three men, so different in their several fields of activity yet united in a common outlook, Jefferson owed an immense debt, the effects of which can be traced throughout his life. They were men of high ethical standards, but their scientific studies had led them to reject the dogmas of traditional orthodox Christianity. Their religious views were probably similar to those of the English Deists of the period. Jefferson imbibed both their ethics and their religious liberalism, but, at least in his later years, he was clearly a Theist. The idea of God at which he ultimately arrived is best illustrated in his letter of April 11, 1823, to John Adams. "I hold (without revelation) that when we take a view of the universe, in its parts, general or particular, it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom of its composition. The movements of the heavenly bodies, so exactly held in their course by the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces; the structure of the earth itself, with its distribution of lands, waters and atmosphere; animal and vegetable bodies, examined in all their minutest particular; insects, mere atoms of life, yet as perfectly organized as man or mammoth;

the mineral substances, their generation and uses; it is impossible, I say, for the human mind not to believe that there is in all this design, cause and effect up to an ultimate cause, a Fabricator of all things from matter and motion, their Preserver and Regulator."[1]

After two years in the College Jefferson entered the law office of George Wythe, where for five years he continued his studies in the classics, and learned to read French, Italian and German, as well as law. More important still, he remained under the influence of Wythe who, as he wrote later, was "devoted to liberty and the natural and equal rights of man," and "who neither troubled, nor perhaps trusted anyone with his religious creed, leaving the world to the conclusion that that religion must be good which could produce a life of such exemplary virtue." But Wythe had derived these sentiments directly from the philosophy of John Locke, whose scientific and political views revolutionized the thinking of the English-speaking world in the first half of the eighteenth century to so great a degree that "if any one man can be said to have dominated the political philosophy of the American Revolution, it is John Locke."[2] Jefferson became thoroughly imbued with Locke's ideas, and later gave them concrete expression in his two most famous writings, *The Declaration of Independence* and the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.*

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[1] 15:426-27.

[2] John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution,* Boston, 1943, pp. 170, 492.

In 1767, at the age of 24, Jefferson was admitted to the bar, and his abilities and training quickly brought him a large and remunerative practice. He was soon earning $3,000 a year in addition to the income of $2,000 from his estate at Shadwell, and the money had ten or twenty times the purchasing power it has today. On New Year's Day, 1772, he married the young widow, Martha Wayles Skelton, and carried her through the winter snows to the one-room brick cottage at Monticello which was the earliest section of the grand mansion he planned to erect there.

The Struggle for "Man's Natural Rights"

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL REFORMS

JEFFERSON's political career began in 1769 with his election to the Virginia House of Burgesses. From the first he was an advocate of radical social reforms, and his religious opinions formed an integral part of his social program. Or, rather, his conception of sound social relations was rooted in his faith in the moral nature of God and man. He believed that all human beings are endowed by their Creator with inherent moral rights and that a social order is to be judged by the measure with which it either protects or suppresses these rights. He was convinced of the ability and willingness of the common man, when well-informed, to frame and to act upon just opinions, and from this conception of human nature flowed his advocacy of freedom; of toleration of diverse beliefs arising in an atmosphere of freedom; and of reason as the God-given instrument by which men learn truth.

At his first session, although himself the owner of many Negro slaves, he sought in vain to secure the passage of an act making it legally possible for slave owners to emancipate their Negroes, the first of a long series of actions and statements aimed to bring about eventual

emancipation.[1] At the same session he supported the votes asserting the rights of the colonies against the Crown, which caused the Governor, then Lord Botetourt, to dissolve the Assembly. In 1774 his pamphlets *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* and *Reply to Lord North,* which foreshadowed the Declaration of Independence, were widely read. Though his views were still too radical for general acceptance these pamphlets gave him such a reputation that when the Continental Congress at Philadelphia two years later appointed a committee to draw up a declaration of independence, Thomas Jefferson, at the age of 33, was made its chairman, although the venerable Benjamin Franklin and John Adams were members. The writing of the famous Declaration fell to him because of his "peculiar felicity of expression." Congress struck out a few passages and altered a few phrases in his draft, but Jefferson is rightly regarded as its author. He had sought "an

[1] Jefferson is often criticized because his lifelong ownership of a large number of slaves ran counter to his statement that all men are born free and equal. He was well aware of the contradiction, and over a period of 60 years sought some way to bring about a gradual and voluntary emancipation. Meantime, to accomplish the other reforms he had at heart, he had to accept the institution of slavery, and make it as beneficent as possible for his own slaves. His position may be roughly compared to that of persons who today see grave moral evils in the existing capitalistic order, but who must live in, and by, that order, because there is no escape from it—unless they go to Russia, where they will find other and perhaps greater evils.

expression of the American mind," to give form and substance to the principles which had become generally accepted in the colonies, but it was significant that he altered the popular claim to "life, liberty and property" to read, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

After his return from Philadelphia he renewed his fight in Virginia for man's "inalienable rights." His aim now was to bring to pass a bloodless social revolution as well as a political one, by overthrowing the feudal control of the state by a few families holding vast landed estates; by abolishing long-standing abuses; and by opening doors of opportunity to the large majority of his fellow citizens to whom they were still effectively closed. When we remember that he belonged to the small, closely-knit Virginia aristocracy of land and slave owners, for whom it was a matter of course that there should be an established church, and that he himself was an elder son who stood to profit by the law of primogeniture and entailed estates, his independence and courage are as remarkable as his far-sighted vision of the American ideal.

To break up the great hereditary estates he proposed and brought about the abolition of entail and primogeniture. He sought laws to eradicate "every fibre . . . of ancient or future aristocracy" based on property, in favor of "the aristocracy of virtue and talent." To produce this latter type of aristocracy he sought to establish a state-wide tax-supported system of education, which should give effect to his belief that only an educated people could understand their political

rights and maintain them in a democratic republic in which "the influence of our government must be shared by all the people." To that end he recommended that the state be divided into wards, each ward to maintain an elementary school in which reading, writing and arithmetic should be taught to all "free children" gratis for three years, a small fee to be charged for further study. Above the elementary schools there were to be twenty-four "middle" schools to which the better pupils should be sent to study grammar, classical learning, geography and mathematics; the whole system to culminate in a university where the most promising youths should be trained for leadership.

This scheme contained the germ of our public-school system of grammar schools, high schools, and state universities, which we now, nearly 175 years later, accept as a matter of course. But to Jefferson's contemporaries his proposal to give elementary education to all the children, and advanced training to the most capable, at public expense, was as revolutionary a measure of social reform as any other item in his program. Sir William Berkeley, Governor of Virginia, in 1670 had written, "I thank God there are no free schools, nor printing; and I hope we shall not have, these hundred years, for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the government. God keep us from both,"—and his hope had been all too well fulfilled. In 1723 the Bishop of London had inquired of the forty-odd clergy then serving in Virginia whether

they had any schools or libraries in their parishes and had been told that there were no libraries[2] and only two or three "charity schools." The situation was little, if any, better when Jefferson made his proposal, which was so startling that even his plan for elementary schools was not adopted until 1796, and then in a form which merely permitted but did not require their establishment. Since most of the wealthy taxpayers objected to being called upon to pay for the education of the common people they generally fought the plan.

It was not until 1818 that the legislature passed the act establishing the University of Virginia, to the building of which at Charlottesville Jefferson gave his ardent devotion during the last eight years of his long life. Its establishment was the fulfilment of hopes which he had nourished for forty years throughout which he had urged the creation of a university free from ecclesiastical control, in which every branch of human knowledge should be taught, including such then novel subjects as agriculture, politics and commerce. Although his thorough knowledge of the Greek and Latin classics had given him a profound respect for the great thinkers of the past, his mind was always forward-looking, convinced of man's capacity to advance steadily toward better ways of life if given intellectual freedom and an untrammelled opportunity for the broadest possible education. Thus he had written to Elbridge Gerry, on January 26, 1799, in answer to questions about his po-

[2] Jefferson also proposed the establishment of a library in each county.

litical and social program, "I am for freedom in religion, and against all manoeuvres to bring about the ascendancy of one sect over another. . . . And I am for encouraging the progress of science in all its branches, and not for raising a hue and cry against the sacred name of philosophy, for awing the human mind by stories of rawhead and bloody bones to a distrust of its own vision and to repose implicitly on that of others, to go backwards instead of forwards to look for improvement, to believe that government, religion, morality, and every other science were in the highest perfection in ages of darkest ignorance, and that nothing can be devised more perfect than what was established by our forefathers."[3] His pride in the University is commemorated in the epitaph which he ordered cut on his tombstone. The epitaph makes no mention of his having been president, but records as his three great achievements his authorship of the Statute for Religious Freedom and of the Declaration of Independence, and that he had been the "father" of the University of Virginia.

As a member of the legislature of 1776 he played an important part in other reforms as well. With Edmund Pendleton and George Wythe he revised the legal code of the state, incidentally securing the abolition of the death penalty except for murder and treason. He introduced the bill which prohibited the importation of slaves from Africa to Virginia, and the bill "passed without opposition and stopped increase of the evil by

[3] 10:78.

importation, leaving to future efforts its final extinction."[4]

In 1784, while a member of the Confederation Congress, he proposed and secured the adoption of the decimal system for our coinage in dollars and cents, to solve the cumbersome and confused currency system then in use. But far more important was the *Report of Government for the Western Territory,* in which he prepared to lay down the basic principles of federal union. It provided for the admission of new states on an equal footing with the original thirteen, to "remain forever a part of this Confederacy of the United States of America," and that after the year 1800 there should "be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said states." One of the most disastrous incidents in our history was the defeat by a single vote of this measure to exclude slavery from all the territories from the Lakes to the Gulf. Two years later he wrote, "The voice of a single individual . . . would have prevented this abominable crime from spreading itself over the country. Thus we see the fate of millions unborn hanging on the tongue of one man, and Heaven was silent in that awful moment! But it is to be hoped it will not always be silent, and that the friends of the rights of human nature will in the end prevail."[5]

[4] 1:56.
[5] F 5:65.

The Struggle for Religious Freedom

THE severest struggle of Jefferson's career, however, was that for complete religious freedom, involving the dis-establishment of the tax-supported Anglican Church. His activities won him the bitter and lifelong opposition of most of the large landowners, as well as that of the Episcopal clergy and conservative churchmen, who consistently portrayed him as the enemy of Christianity. It was their opposition to a reform which he considered essential for human liberty, later reënforced by his observation of the corrupt and reactionary Roman hierarchy in France, which led him to take a strongly anti-clerical position, and to say that he knew of no example in history in which a priest-ridden people had been able to maintain a free civil government. Surely it was one of the minor ironies of history that when the majestic Jefferson Memorial in Washington was dedicated in 1943, on the 200th anniversary of his birth, two prelates, one a Protestant Episcopalian, the other a Roman Catholic, should have given the invocation and the benediction. Both of them, had they been Jefferson's contemporaries, would have vigorously denounced him as an infidel. But the application of that epithet to him had faded with the passage of time. Even in his old age the rumor was circulated that he had

turned to religion. He referred to this in a letter to Mrs. Samuel H. Smith, August 6, 1816, saying, "The priests, indeed, have heretofore thought proper to ascribe to me religious, or rather anti-religious, sentiments of their own fabric, but such as soothed their resentments against the Act of Virginia for establishing Religious Freedom. They wished him to be thought atheist, deist, or devil who could advocate freedom from their religious dictations. . . . The imputations of irreligion having spent their force, they think an imputation of a change might now be turned to account as a bolster for their duperies."[1] But Jefferson's view of religion had not changed; it had only ripened to more adequate expression with the years. He was still what the prelates in question would have called an infidel. No doubt they were glad to take part in so notable a ceremony and perhaps either they themselves were ignorant of his opinions, or assumed that the public would not notice the incongruity of their participation. Jefferson himself might have seen in it an illustration of the saying of Jesus about those who build monuments to prophets whom their forefathers had slain.

But if the entrenched landed proprietors and the Anglican churchmen opposed him, he was ardently supported by the underprivileged and by the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Quakers and Mennonites, so many of whom were coming into the western part of the state that they outnumbered the adherents of the Angli-

[1] 15:60-61.

can Church and clamored for relief from taxation to support that denomination.

Far more fundamental issues of religious toleration were at stake, however, than exemption from taxation for a state-supported church, for at that time heresy was still, by the common law, a capital offense, punishable by burning, and by act of the Assembly of 1705 a person brought up in the Christian religion who denied the existence of God, or the Trinity, or asserted that there were more gods than one, or denied the truth of Christianity or the divine authority of scripture, was punishable on the first offense by incapacity to hold any office, ecclesiastical, civil or military, and on the second offense by incapacity to receive any gift or legacy or to serve as a guardian or executor, and by three years' imprisonment in jail.[2] That these laws had become, in effect, dead letters did not eliminate the danger that they might be revived. It is no wonder that Wythe and Jefferson wished to keep their opinions to themselves. But to Jefferson's whole moral philosophy all such legislation was profoundly repugnant. All his life long he fought attempts to limit freedom of thought. "Subject opinion to coercion," he wrote in his *Notes on Virginia*, "whom will you make your inquisitors? Fallible men, governed by bad passions, by private as well as public reasons. And why subject it to coercion? To produce uniformity. But is uniformity of opinion desirable? No more than of face or stature. . . . Differ-

[2] 2:219-20.

ence of opinion is advantageous to religion. . . . The effect of coercion has been to make one half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites. . . . Reason and persuasion are the only practicable instruments by which men can be gathered into the fold of truth."[3]

Therefore when Jefferson drafted a constitution to be submitted to the Virginia Convention called in 1776 to organize the state, he included an article reading, "All persons shall have full and free liberty of religious opinion; nor shall any be compelled to frequent or maintain any religious institution." This draft of a constitution was rejected but a Bill of Rights was adopted, the 16th section of which read, "All men are equally entitled to the full and free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience." When the legislature assembled soon after, it exempted dissenters from supporting the established church and suspended the law which determined ministerial salaries, leaving the Anglican clergy dependent on voluntary contributions. This Act was continued in 1777 and 1778 and was made perpetual in 1779. In 1780 dissenting ministers were given the right to perform marriages, and marriages observed after the fashion of the Quakers or the Mennonites were recognized as valid. In 1784 all laws favoring the Episcopal Church were repealed and the management of its affairs was placed entirely in its own hands. And finally, in 1786, while Jefferson was in France, the legislature passed his Statute for Re-

[3] 2:222-23.

ligious Freedom, which he had prepared in 1777 and had first presented in 1779. It was adopted as he had written it, save for the substitution of a few phrases from the earlier Bill of Rights.

This Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom is so important as illustrating Jefferson's deepest convictions that its rather lengthy preamble should be read in its entirety:

> Well aware that Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion, who being Lord of both body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his almighty power to do; that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time; that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving

his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness, and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporal rewards which, proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labors for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that, therefore, the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to the offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow citizens he has a natural right; that it tends also to corrupt the principles of that very religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honors and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles, on the supposition of their ill tendency, is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency, will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as

they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its offices to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and, finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them:

Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in nowise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

And though we well know this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding assemblies, constituted with the powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act irrevocable, would be of no effect in law, yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present or to narrow its op-

eration, such act will be an infringement of natural right.

We have, in this country, so long been accustomed to the separation of church and state that we have forgotten how great a document in the history of liberty is this first charter of religious freedom. There is no legislation comparable to it in all Christendom throughout the fourteen centuries following the infamous decree of intolerance which the Emperor Theodosius I had issued in the year 380.[4]

Even after the Reformation the principle *cuius regio, eius religio*—the religion of the ruler is the religion of the state—was generally accepted in Europe. The earliest exception was the notable decree passed in 1568 by the Diet of Torda, no doubt with the support of King John Sigismund of Transylvania, to establish mutual toleration between the liberal and conservative wings of the Reformed (Calvinistic) Church. It ordered "that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well; if not, no one shall compel them, but they shall keep the preachers whose doctrine they approve. Therefore none of the

[4] "We will that all our subjects . . . believe the one divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of majesty co-equal, in the holy Trinity. We will that all those who embrace this creed be called Catholic Christians. We brand all the senseless followers of other religions by the infamous name of heretics, and forbid their conventicles to assume the name of churches."

Superintendents or others shall annoy or abuse the preachers on account of their religion according to the previous constitutions, or allow any to be imprisoned or to be punished by removal from his post on account of his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." This decree was followed in 1571 by a further decree granting equal rights to the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the Reformed, and the now definitely recognized Unitarian Church. Elsewhere the Protestant authorities were little less intolerant than the Catholic and even in Holland and England toleration of dissenting groups was of slow growth. Even John Locke, advocating separation of church and state, had not gone so far as to advocate religious freedom for Catholics or atheists. The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, therefore, went far beyond anything hitherto dreamed of in Europe.

In British North America there had been a wide variety of practice. In the New England colonies, except Rhode Island, the Congregational Churches formed a tax-supported establishment, as the Anglican Church did in Virginia and the Carolinas, in Maryland after 1693 and in Georgia after 1752. In the Dutch colony of New Netherlands (New York and New Jersey) it was ordered in 1640 that "no other religion shall be publicly admitted . . . except the Reformed," though later an attempt was made to establish the Anglican Church, with only limited success.

It is often claimed that Maryland was the first colony to permit freedom in religion. George Calvert, first

Lord Baltimore, who, though a devout Roman Catholic, was in favor with the King, had desired to open Maryland as a refuge for Catholics who suffered under religious disabilities in England. The charter was granted in 1632, after his death, to his son Cecilius, second Lord Baltimore, who adopted the principle of religious liberty because he knew very well that to exclude Protestants would lead to cancellation of the grant, and who was sagacious enough to see that a measure of religious freedom would encourage settlers. He therefore gave instructions that no scandal was to be given to Protestants. In 1649 the Maryland Toleration Act was passed, the last clause of which provided "that no person or persons whatsoever within this Province . . . professing to believe in Jesus Christ, shall from henceforth bee any waies troubled, Molested or discountenanced for or in respect of his or her religion nor in the free exercise thereof within this Province or Islands thereto belonging nor in any way compelled to the beliefe or exercise of any other Religion against his or her consent, so that they be not unfaithful to the Lord Proprietary, or molest or conspire against the civil Government established, or to be established, in This Province under him or his heires."

It is on this clause that the claim is based that Maryland was tolerant. Persons who make this claim, however, overlook the first clause of the Act, which reads, "that whatsover person or persons within this Province and the Islands thereunto belonging shall from henceforth blaspheme God, that is Curse him or

deny our Saviour Jesus Christ to be the sonne of God, or shall deny the Holy Trinity the Father, sonne and holy Ghost, or the Godhead of any of the sd Three Persons or the Trinity or the Unity of the Godhead or shall use or utter any reproachful Speeches, words or languages concerning the said Holy Trinity or any of the said Three persons thereof, shall be punished with death and confiscation of all his or her lands and goods to the Lord Proprietary and his heires."[5] Since this first clause governs the later ones it is obvious that toleration was limited to Catholics and orthodox Protestants, and excluded Jews, Unitarians or free-thinkers of any sort. That is not what we know as religious freedom.

Even in Pennsylvania religious toleration was not quite so broad as is commonly supposed. The Charter granted to William Penn in 1681 makes no reference to religion except for a provision that "if twenty inhabitants [of a given community] signify in writing to the Bishop of London their desire for a preacher, such . . . as may be sent by him shall be allowed to reside and exercise their function in the colony, without any deniall or molestacon whatsoever." In 1682 Penn drafted his *Frame of Government,* prescribing that all magistrates and members of the council or assembly "shall be such as profess faith in Jesus Christ," and guaranteeing complete freedom to all "who confess and acknowledge the one Almighty and Eternal God to be the Creator, Upholder and Ruler of the World." The

[5] Percy G. Skriven, *The First Parishes of Maryland,* Baltimore, 1923, pp. 10-11.

same year a law was passed requiring that all officers, deputies and electors of deputies "shall be such as profess and declare that they believe in Jesus Christ to be the Saviour of the World." In other words, although Jews or other non-Christian theists could live in the province, they could neither hold office nor vote. Atheists and deists were forbidden to enter the province.[6]

Rhode Island alone granted complete freedom, though without the sweeping inclusiveness of the Virginia Statute. In 1641 the government was legally defined as "a Democracy, or popular government," and it was provided that "none shall be accounted a delinquent for doctrine, provided that he is not directly repugnant to the government or laws established," and at the next session it was "ordered, that the law of the last court, made concerning liberty of conscience in point of doctrine, be perpetuated."[7]

The Virginia Statute thus set a standard of legislation guaranteeing a more complete freedom of religion than anything hitherto known in any of the North American colonies except Rhode Island, a standard to which the other states sooner or later conformed, often after bitter opposition. Thus, after the passage of a bill establishing religious liberty in Vermont, the *Dartmouth Gazette* of Nov. 18, 1807, called the act "a striking instance of the pernicious and direful, the infernal consequences to which the leveling spirit of de-

[6] Sanford H. Cobb, *The Rise of Religious Liberty in America*, New York, 1902, pp. 441-444.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 430.

mocracy must inevitably tend," and one which disclosed "at once its great and only object, viz.: the eradication of every moral, virtuous and religious principle from the human heart."[8]

In Connecticut, until the adoption of a state constitution in 1818, the Congregational churches were tax-supported; the ministers of other denominations (except Episcopalian) were in practice denied the right to conduct marriage services; and Unitarianism was classed with atheism, polytheism and apostasy as a felony subjecting the holder to loss of employment, whether civil, ecclesiastical or military.[9]

In Massachusetts taxation for the support of Congregational churches, to which virtually the entire population adhered in the early days, was a fixed and generally approved practice. In the course of the eighteenth century, however, as a result of protests from the increasing number of dissenters—Episcopalian, Baptist and Quaker—steps were gradually taken to relieve them of the hardship of taxation for the support of churches to which they did not belong, although it was not until 1833 that the last vestiges of connection between church and state were abolished. To our present-day thinking a tax-supported church seems an indefensible anachronism, but it is still maintained in England, and, through-

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[8] Quoted in Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson in Power*, pp. 361-2.

[9] Swift's *System of Law*, i.i. 320, 321, quoted in M. L. Greene's *The Development of Religious Liberty in Connecticut*, 1905, p. 420.

out the colonial period, and later, dissenters in England suffered from far more serious disabilities than were actually imposed in most of the Colonies.

In spite of all opposition and of dire predictions of the evil results which would follow, the principles of Jefferson's Virginia Statute at length prevailed and have become the foundation stone for that freedom which is the most precious element in our heritage. Jefferson never wavered in his championship of them, and later in life wrote that immortal sentence now cut on a wall of the University of Virginia, "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."[10]

[10] 10:174-75.

Jefferson and the Federal Constitution

Jefferson was Governor of Virginia through two of the most distressing years of Revolutionary warfare, and then served for five years (1784-89) as minister plenipotentiary in Paris. He had long been acquainted with French literature and philosophy, and noted with interest that whereas in Catholic countries philosophers became atheists, in Protestant England they did not, though they commonly rejected the dogmas of orthodox Christianity. While in France he developed a deep affection for the French people, and an equally profound dislike for that country's corrupt government, the overthrow of which he witnessed. On August 13, 1786, he wrote from Paris to George Wythe, "If anybody thinks that kings, nobles, or priests are good conservators of the public happiness, send them here. It is the best school in the universe to cure them of that folly. They will see here, with their own eyes, that these descriptions of men are an abandoned confederacy against the happiness of the mass of the people. The omnipotence of their effect cannot be better proved than in this country particularly, where, notwithstanding the finest soil upon earth, the finest climate under heaven, and a people of the most benevolent, the most gay and amia-

ble of which the human form is susceptible; where such a people, I say, surrounded by so many blessings from nature, are yet loaded with misery by kings, priests and nobles and by them alone."[1]

Had Jefferson been in this country instead of in Paris at this period he would certainly have represented Virginia in the Convention which drafted the Federal Constitution. He had already pointed the way towards such a constitution in his *Report of Government for the Western Territory* and he had written to James Madison on July 1, 1784, "I find the conviction growing strongly that nothing can preserve our Confederacy unless the bond of Union, their common council, be strengthened."[2] Although he did not return to America until December, 1789, when the country-wide debate upon the adoption of the constitution had drawn to a close, his friends here had kept him well posted about what was going on. On March 13, 1789, he had written to Francis Hopkinson a letter which well illustrates his complete independence of spirit. "You say that I have been dished up to you as an anti-federalist,[3] and ask me

[1] F 5:153-154.

[2] 4:458.

[3] The words "federalist" and "anti-federalist" are here used in the sense then current as designating those in favor of or opposed to the adoption of the Federal Constitution, a usage derived from the famous papers, for the most part written by Alexander Hamilton, under the title of *The Federalist*. It was not until Washington's administration was drawing to a close that the word Federalist became the name of the conservative

if it be just. . . . I am not a federalist, because I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever, in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else, where I was capable of thinking for myself. Such an addiction is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all. Therefore I am not of the party of the federalists. But I am much further from that of the anti-federalists. I approved, from the first moment, of the great mass of what is in the new Constitution. . . . What I disapproved, from the first moment also, was the want of a bill of rights . . . to secure freedom in religion, freedom of the press, freedom from monopolies, freedom from unlawful imprisonment, freedom from a permanent military, and a trial by jury, in all cases determinable by the law of the land. I disapproved, also, the perpetual re-eligibility of the President. . . . With respect to the declaration of rights, I suppose the majority of the United States are of my opinion; for I apprehend, all the anti-federalists, and a very respectable proportion of the federalists, think such a declaration should be now annexed."[4]

After his return from France, he joined in the demand which resulted in the adoption of the Bill of Rights as the first Amendment, with its provision for religious freedom, "Congress shall make no law respect-

political party opposed to the Republican (later Democratic) party led by Jefferson.

[4] 7:300-302.

ing an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." As thus amended he regarded the Constitution as "unquestionably the wisest yet presented to man"—an interesting contrast to the view of Hamilton, who wrote in 1802, "Perhaps no man in the United States has done more for the present Constitution than myself; and contrary to all my anticipations of its fate, . . . I am still laboring to prop the frail and worthless fabric."[5] In the government formed after the adoption of the Constitution, Jefferson became, in 1790, Washington's first Secretary of State, and in 1796 he was elected Vice-President under John Adams.

[5] Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson in Power*, pp. 145, 94-95.

Attacks on Jefferson's Religious Views

PROVOKED BY POLITICAL ANIMOSITY

It was not until the campaign which resulted in his election to the presidency in 1800 that violent attacks on Jefferson's religious views and personal character became widespread beyond the boundaries of his native state. Such attacks were, of course, part and parcel of the opposition to his political program, which was to bring about on a national scale the social revolution which he had, in considerable degree, effected in Virginia and which he believed essential to the fruition of the political revolution which had achieved independence. During the presidency of John Adams two clear-cut political parties had emerged, the Federalists, who represented the conservative elements, strongest in the cities, the clergy, lawyers, merchants and propertied class, who had long been in political control and were well satisfied with things as they were; and the Republicans—or Democrats as they were soon called—who chafed under the restraints still imposed upon the mass of the people and who were demanding a larger share in the government. The Republican party included the farmers, artisans, and wage-earners, and the religious

bodies fighting ecclesiastical domination, especially the Baptists and the Methodists.

To the Federalists the issue was clear enough. They had been profoundly shocked by the Reign of Terror following the French Revolution. Jefferson had approved of that Revolution, therefore he was an atheist and a Jacobin bent on overthrowing religion and the established order of society. The Massachusetts *Mercury* in 1800 pointed out that "there can be but two parties in a country; the friends of order and its foes. Under the banners of the first are ranged all men of property, all quiet, honest, peaceable, orderly, unambitious citizens. In the ranks of the last are enlisted all desperate, embarrassed, unprincipled, disorderly, ambitious, disaffected, morose men."[1] Fisher Ames wrote to a correspondent, "The federalists must . . . endeavor to make state justice and state power a shelter of the wise, and good, and rich, from the wild, destroying rage of the Southern Jacobins."[2] An English traveler quotes a federalist campaign document as saying that "the points in dispute go to the foundations of social establishments, and aim at a total revolution in the present order of society; that ignorance, prejudice, profligacy and their concomitant want, are marshalled and combined against all laudable eminence."[3] The Federalists, of course, saw themselves as the party of law and

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[1] Quoted in W. A. Robinson, *Jeffersonian Democracy in New England,* New Haven, 1916, p. 53.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

order, of the rich, wise and good who alone could be trusted with the responsibility of government. And although they had played a great part in shaping the Federal Union they began to question whether it might not become an unholy alliance with the wild men of the west and southwest, especially after the Louisiana Purchase clearly indicated a steady diminution in the influence of New England.

The Republicans saw the issue with equal clearness. The election was to determine whether the government should continue in the hands of a small minority of the educated and well-to-do, or whether it should be controlled by the whole people. The Republican *Independent Chronicle*, of Boston, in 1797, stated the case with moderation, practically paraphrasing Jefferson's known views. "The Aristocrats [Federalists] are of the opinion that the people of this country are entirely incapable of supporting a government upon republican principles. . . . The Jacobins, [Republicans] on the other hand, contend that a government formed upon an aggregation of Republics, beginning at the Town Meeting, widening into Counties and Districts and still further to a Governor, Council, and Legislature in each State, and thereon the whole composing a Federal system which unites all in one common interest and the whole system supported by a frequent election of magistrates and rulers, is most apt to preserve the political independence and to promote the happiness of the people."[4] Furthermore the Republicans were strong

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Unionists and nationalists, eager for expansion and the admission of new states.

Now although the social organization of New England differed markedly from the feudalism of Virginia, the New England clergy belonged to an inherited "standing order" which gave them power and prestige as definite and extensive as that enjoyed by the clergy of Virginia, whose enmity Jefferson had incurred in his fight for religious freedom twenty years earlier. The New England ministers had, with few exceptions, promoted the Revolution and had been in favor of adopting the Constitution. Broadly speaking, they belonged to the best educated element in the community and were respected for their high, if sometimes rigid and narrow, standards of conduct. They were assuredly classed with the wise and good. Naturally they were tenacious of their prestige and influence, particularly in Connecticut where the Congregational ministers exerted a political control in favor of a conservative government in safe hands not surpassed by any similar ecclesiastical group in any other time or place in our history, unless it be by the Roman Catholic prelates in some of our modern cities. Therefore, though they had backed the political revolution in which Jefferson had played so large a part, they were fearful of the social revolution for which he had come clearly to stand. With a few notable exceptions, like the Baptist preacher John Leland in Connecticut and the Rev. William Bentley in Salem, they were ardent Federalists, and their political sympathies were

strongly reënforced by the alarming reports of Jefferson's religious views.

The great majority of Congregationalists, beyond the liberal element which was moving towards Unitarianism in eastern Massachusetts, still adhered to a Calvinistic theology which they took as a divine revelation of ultimate truth, and Jefferson's toleration of diverse opinions in religion, including the right openly to disbelieve in Christianity, seemed to them the most dangerous of errors. Jefferson, in his *Notes on Virginia* (which had long since established his European reputation as a scientist) had written, "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God."[5] Electioneering pamphlets by clergymen pointed out that in the same book Jefferson had rejected the Biblical account of a universal deluge; had intimated that Negroes might have constituted a distinct race from the beginning of mankind; and had said that Jews were not God's chosen people but that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made the peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."

In the eyes of the orthodox, a man who thus denied what they regarded as the fundamental truths of revealed religion was too dangerous an enemy of Christianity to be president. He had been long in France and

[5] 2:221.

had been in sympathy with the Revolution there. The ministers traced the growth of irreligion among the young to French atheism, to which they suspected Jefferson to have been converted. Alexander Hamilton in his antipathy to Jefferson had called him "an atheist in religion and a fanatic in politics," though he well knew that at least the first part of his accusation was untrue, for Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence had said that men "are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights," and in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom had referred to "the Holy Author of our religion" and declared "that Almighty God hath created the mind free."

In general the Federalists denounced Jefferson as "a Francophile, a Deist, and a leveler." As early as 1796, after the election of Adams and Jefferson, a Connecticut minister had prayed, "O Lord, wilt thou bestow upon the Vice-President a double portion of Thy grace, for Thou knowest he needs it."[6] This was mild compared to later utterances. On August 13, 1800, Jefferson wrote to a correspondent that Rev. Cotton Mather Smith had asserted that "I had obtained my property by fraud and robbery; that in one instance I had defrauded a widow and fatherless children of an estate, to which I was executor, of ten thousand pounds sterling . . . and that all this could be proved. Every tittle of it is false, there not having existed a single circumstance

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[6] M. L. Greene, *The Development of Religious Liberty in Connecticut*, Boston, 1905, p. 416.

of my life to which any part of it can hang."[7] Rev. William Bentley noted in his *Diary*, under date of January 21, 1806, "The political conduct of the clergy is no where so insolent as in Connecticut. In that state a . . . pastor at Branford scrupled not to call the President a debauchee, an infidel and a liar." And at a Federalist banquet in Middletown, Jefferson was toasted in the following words, "May he receive from his fellow citizens the reward of his merits—a halter!"[8]

President Ezra Stiles of Yale College was a notable exception to his Congregationalist brethren who thus bore false witness against the man they hated. Stiles was a broad-minded and highly intelligent person in touch with the leading men of his day. When Jefferson was in New England, after his service as governor of Virginia and before sailing for France, he visited Stiles for two or three days in New Haven. Stiles pumped him for information about William and Mary College, and about scientific subjects, and noted in his *Diary*, June 8, 1784, "The Gov. is a most ingenius Naturalist and Philosopher, a truly scientific and learned Man, and every way excellent."[9] Jefferson later corresponded with him from France about scientific subjects or interesting inventions, and on August 27, 1790, after Jefferson had become Secretary of State, Stiles addressed a letter to him on the subject of national finances which

[7] 10:171-72.
[8] Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson in Power*, p. 71.
[9] *Literary Diary* III, p. 125.

shows his high opinion of Jefferson, although he was well aware of his religious views, for he concluded:

> I am rejoyced that the United States are honored with your Counsels & Abilities in the high Department of the Secretary of State. This I say without Adulation, who am a Spectator only & a most cordial Friend to the Liberties and Glory of the Amer. Republic, tho' without the least Efficiency or Influence into its Councils. There are some Characters which I cannot flatter; their Merit is above it. Such are those of a Franklin, and Adams, an Elsworth, a Jefferson & a Washington. I glory in them all; I rejoyce that my Country is happy in their useful Labors. And for yourself I can only wish, that when that best of Men, the present President, shall be translated to the World of Light, a Jefferson may sucede him in the Presidency of the United States. Forgive me this Effusion of the Sentiments of Sincere Respect & Estimation, & permit me the honor of subscribing myself, Dear Sir,
>
> Yours most affectionate, obliged, Hble Servt
>
> Ezra Stiles[10]

Stiles died in 1795, and his successor as president of Yale was a man of a very different type, whom he had particularly disliked, Rev. Timothy Dwight. Dwight was a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, an ambitious and able but narrow-minded man, as firmly con-

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[10] Autograph letter, Yale University Library. Quoted by permission.

vinced as any pope that he was the infallible interpreter of God's will. After Jefferson's election as president he groaned, "We have a country governed by blockheads and knaves," and for Dwight the words "democracy" and "infidelity" were synonymous.

Needless to say, none of the political, financial, religious or moral disasters predicted by the Federalists followed Jefferson's election by a large majority in 1800, or his re-election in 1804 by a landslide of 162 electoral votes, against 14 for his rival, Pinckney. On the contrary, under the leadership of the men whom Dwight had called "blockheads and knaves," through the first six years of Jefferson's administration the people prospered as never before; national finances were greatly improved; the iniquities of the notorious Alien and Sedition Acts were corrected; important reforms were achieved; the area of the country was doubled; and all denominations found that their churches could flourish in an atmosphere of religious freedom.

Jefferson's last two years as president were handicapped by the highhanded and illegal depredations on American commerce on the part of Spain, France and England, which resulted in the War of 1812 in the administration of his successor James Madison. Jefferson was a steadfast advocate of the policy of seeking a peaceful solution of international disputes whenever possible. He wrote to Kosciusko on April 13, 1811, when the Napoleonic wars were threatening to engulf this country, "Peace . . . has been our principle, peace is our interest, and peace has saved to the world this only

plant of free and rational government now existing in it."[11] He believed that the moral law applied to nations as truly as to individuals, saying, "I have but one system of ethics for men as for nations . . . Moral duties are obligatory on nations as on individuals. . . . It is strangely absurd to suppose that a million human beings, collected together, are not under the same moral laws which bind each of them separately."

Jefferson steadfastly refused to make any public reply to attacks on his religious beliefs or his moral character, holding to the teaching of his preceptor, Wythe, that "we are accountable to God alone for our religious views," and that his way of life would speak for itself. In 1800 he wrote to James Monroe that it would be impossible to answer all the lies of his slanderers, for while he was engaged with one, they would be publishing twenty new ones. But he was keenly sensitive to such attacks, which continued throughout his life, and in his later years not infrequently expressed his views to correspondents whom he could trust. In January, 1802, he sent to Levi Lincoln in Massachusetts, a copy of an address he had written to the Danbury (Conn.) Association of Baptist Churches which had supported him. He said, "I know that it will give great offense to the New England clergy, but the advocate of religious freedom is to expect neither peace nor forgiveness from them." And near the end of his life he wrote to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, the distinguished physician of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who had asked permission

[11] 13:41-42.

to publish one of his letters setting forth his religious opinions "No, my dear Sir, not for all the world. Into what a nest of hornets would it thrust my head! . . . Don Quixote undertook to redress the bodily ills of this world, but the redressment of mental vagaries would be an enterprise more than Quixotic. I should as soon undertake to bring the crazy skulls of Bedlam to sound understanding, as inculcate reason into that of an Athanasian. I am old and tranquility is now my *summum bonum*. Keep me therefore from the fire and faggots of Calvin and his victim Servetus."[12]

[12] 15:391.

Jefferson's Reverence for Jesus

AND HIS MORAL TEACHINGS

As early as 1798-99, at the request of Benjamin Rush, Jefferson prepared a *Syllabus* of his religious opinions to convince intimate friends that the slanders about him were untrue, but he sent it to only six trusted friends, including Benjamin Rush, John Adams and William Short, in strict secrecy. After the death of Rush in 1813 he asked the latter's son to destroy or return the copy in his hands. And on April 25, 1816, he wrote to F. A. van der Kemp, "The *Syllabus* was addressed to a friend to whom I had promised a more detailed view. But finding I should never have time for that, I sent him what I thought should be the outlines of such a work; the same subject entering into the correspondence between Mr. Adams and myself, I sent him a copy of it. . . . No copy of it, but that in the possession of Mr. Adams, now exists out of my hands. I have used this caution lest it should get out in connection with my name; and I was unwilling to draw on myself a swarm of insects whose buzz is more disquieting than their bite. As an abstract thing, and without any intimation from what quarter derived, I can have

no objection to its being committed to the consideration of the world."[1] So strictly did he adhere to his principle, "I inquire after no man's religious opinions and trouble none with mine," that though he gave a copy of the *Syllabus* to his daughter in 1803 none of his grandchildren ever saw it until after his death.

The *Syllabus* is no more than a somewhat extended letter addressed to Rush, the opening words of which have already been quoted on p. 4. He goes on to estimate the merit of the doctrines of Jesus as compared with those of Judaism and of the classic philosophers. The precepts of the latter, he pointed out, "related chiefly to ourselves, and the government of those passions which, unrestrained, would disturb our tranquility. In this branch of philosophy they were really great. In developing our duties to others, they were short and defective. They embraced, indeed, the circles of kindred and friends, and inculcated patriotism, . . . towards our neighbors and countrymen they taught justice, but scarcely viewed them as within the circle of benevolence. Still less have they inculcated peace, charity and love to our fellow men, or embraced with benevolence the whole family of mankind." The Jews believed in one God, but their ideas of him and his attributes [as set forth in the Old Testament] were degrading and injurious, and their ethics "often irreconcilable with the sound dictates of reason and morality, as they respect intercourse with those around us; and repulsive

[1] 15:1-2.

and anti-social, as respecting other nations. They needed reformation."

Jesus he regarded as a great reformer. "His parentage was obscure; his education null; his natural endowments great; his life correct and innocent; he was meek, benevolent, patient, firm, disinterested, and of the sublimest eloquence. The disadvantages under which his doctrines appear are remarkable. Like Socrates and Epictetus, he wrote nothing himself. . . . All the learned of his country, entrenched in its power and riches, were opposed to him, lest his labors should undermine their advantages, and the committing to writing his life and doctrines fell on unlettered and ignorant men, who wrote, too, from memory, and not till long after the transactions had passed. According to the ordinary fate of those who attempt to enlighten and reform mankind, he fell an early victim to the jealousy and combination of the altar and the throne" . . . before . . . "the course of his preaching . . . presented occasions for developing a complete system of morals. Hence the doctrines which he really delivered were defective as a whole, and fragments only of what he did deliver have come to us mutilated, misstated, and often unintelligible. They have been still more disfigured by the corruptions of schismatizing followers, who have found an interest in sophisticating and perverting the simple doctrines he taught. . . . Notwithstanding these disadvantages, a system of morals is presented to us, which, if filled up in the style and spirit of the rich fragments he left us, would be the most perfect and

sublime that has ever been taught by man. . . . His moral doctrines, relating to kindred and friends were more pure and perfect than those of the most correct of philosophers, and greatly more so than the Jews; and they went far beyond both in inculcating universal philanthropy, not only to kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all mankind, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids. . . . The precepts of philosophy, and of the Hebrew code, laid hold of actions only. He pushed his scrutinies into the heart of man; erected his tribunal in the region of his thoughts, and purified the waters at the fountain head." Hence "the peculiar superiority of the system of Jesus over all others."[2]

The modern scholar, accustomed to interpret Old Testament religion and ethics from the evolutionary point of view, is likely to place Judaism on a good deal higher level than did Jefferson, and to point out that the education of Jesus can hardly be called "null" in view of his familiarity with the Hebrew scriptures and his ability to read Isaiah publicly in the synagogue, though he was not, of course, educated in the school of the scribes and pharisees. But Jefferson was substantially correct in his main thesis.

It was his deep interest in the ethical teachings of Jesus which led him, soon after he drafted his *Syllabus*, to compile the first draft of what he originally called

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[2] 10:379-385.

"The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth," or, in its later form, "The Morals of Jesus," but which is now commonly but quite inaccurately called "Jefferson's Bible." This compilation clearly reveals Jefferson's religious views, but his plan is best understood if we first note his complete rejection of the dogmas of traditional Christianity. He regarded Jesus as a human teacher, not infallible, because he was limited by the conditions of the time and place in which he lived, but nevertheless as "this great reformer," "this first of human sages," "the benevolent and sublime reformer of the Jewish religion." When he (rarely) refers to Jesus as "our Saviour" it is without theological implication. His knowledge of science led him to reject all miracles, including the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Of the former he wrote to John Adams in 1823, "The day will come when the account of the birth of Christ as accepted in the Trinitarian churches will be classed with the fable of Minerva springing from the brain of Jupiter."

In similar tone he had written in 1817 to William Short of "the artificial systems invented by ultra-Christian sects . . . the immaculate conception [he meant the supernatural conception of Christ], his deification, the creation of the world by him, his corporeal presence in the Eucharist, the Trinity, original sin, atonement, regeneration, election, orders of hierarchy." To the Unitarian preacher and historian, Jared Sparks, he wrote on Nov. 4, 1820, "The religion of Jesus is founded on the unity of God, and this principle chiefly gave it triumph over the rabble of heathen gods then

acknowledged"; and in a letter of December 8, 1821, to Timothy Pickering of Salem, who had been his bitter political enemy but who was also a Unitarian, he spoke of "the incomparable jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic that three are one and one is three." He had, in truth, a deep dislike of "the impious dogmatists Athanasius and Calvin," and of the whole system of medieval theology based on the doctrines of the apostle Paul, who, he believed, had been the first to corrupt the simple teachings of Jesus.

In repudiating all these traditional theological dogmas he took a position completely opposed to that not only of the Episcopal Church but of other orthodox Protestant denominations. His independent spirit, his antipathy to the bitter sectarian quarrels of the time, and his intense dislike of the bigotry from which he had suffered are shown in the letter which he wrote on June 25, 1819, to the younger Ezra Stiles. "In that branch of religion which regards the moralities of life, and the duties of a social being, which teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to do good to all men, I am sure that you and I do not differ. We probably differ on the dogmas of theology, the foundations of all sectarianism, and on which no two sects dream alike; for if they did they would then be of the same. You say you are a Calvinist. I am not. I am of a sect by myself, so far as I know. . . . It is the speculations of crazy theologists which have made a Babel of a religion the most moral and sublime ever preached to man, and calculated

to heal, and not to create differences. These religious animosities I impute to those who call themselves ministers and who engraft their casuistries on the stock of his [Jesus'] simple precepts."[3]

[3] 15:203-4.

Jefferson's Compilation of the "Morals of Jesus"

It was these "simple precepts" of Jesus which Jefferson sought to compile, not only for his own use but also for the instruction of the Indians in fundamental Christian principles, for he had an interest in and sympathy with the Indians which was shared by few others in his day. About the beginning of 1804 he sent to Philadelphia for two Greek Testaments and two in English, from which to cut the desired passages. And then we have the unique spectacle of a president, whom his enemies denounced as a foe of Christianity, spending his late evenings in the White House, after his company had left, in diligently piecing together passages from the Gospels to make a connected story of the life and teachings of Jesus. The passages clipped from his English Testaments he mounted in a booklet of forty-six pages, under the title of "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth, extracted from the account of his life and doctrines as given by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Being an abridgement of the New Testament for the use of the Indians, unembarrassed with matters of fact or faith beyond the level of their comprehensions."

His satisfaction in what he had done is indicated in a letter he later (1813) wrote to John Adams. "We

must reduce our volume to the simple Evangelists: select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the amphibologisms into which they have been led, by forgetting, often, or not understanding what had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions as to his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves. There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his and which is as easily distinguished as diamonds in a dunghill. The result is an octavo of forty-six pages of pure and unsophisticated doctrines such as were professed and acted upon by the unlettered Apostles, the Apostolic Fathers, and the Christians of the first century."[1]

Because of the pressure of public events while he was in office, and the burden of incessant correspondence and the scarcely less incessant stream of visitors after his retirement to Monticello, he was held back for more than a decade from work on the more ambitious compilation which he had in mind. But early in 1816 he wrote to Charles Thomson, "I . . . have made a wee little book . . . which I call the Philosophy of Jesus: it is a paradigma of his doctrines, made by cutting the texts out of the book, and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time and subject.

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[1] 13:390.

A more beautiful or more precious morsel of ethics I have never seen; it is a document in proof that *I* am a *real Christian,* that is to say a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call *me* infidel and *themselves* Christians and preachers of the gospel, while they draw all their characteristic dogmas from what its author never said or saw. They have compounded from the heathen mysteries a system beyond the comprehension of man, of which the great reformer . . . were he to return to earth, would not recognize one feature. . . . If I had time I would add to my little book the Greek, Latin and French texts, in columns side by side."[2] And, referring to this project in the letter to van der Kemp already quoted, he added, "This shall be the work of the ensuing winter, . . . If a history of his life can be added, written with the same view of the subject, the world will . . . at length see the immortal merit of this first of human sages."[3]

Although Jefferson had proposed to make this task the work of "the ensuing winter" [1816-17] it was probably not undertaken, or at least not completed until 1819. The finished product was a booklet of 85 numbered leaves with the Greek and Latin texts mounted on the left-hand pages, the French and English on the right, preceded by a title page and a table of the texts used, covering two and a half leaves, in Jefferson's handwriting, and by small maps of Palestine and of Asia

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[2] F 10:5-6.
[3] 15:2-3.

Minor pasted in. The pages were 8½ inches high and 4 15/16 inches wide, the booklet being 1¼ inches thick at the back, 1 inch at the front. The contents included some passages omitted from the earlier compilation, and some rearrangements. When the work was completed Jefferson had the book bound in red morocco with gilt edging, and with the title *Morals of Jesus* stamped in gold letters on the back. The inside cover and the fly leaves were covered with a gray marbled paper. The binder inserted his label, "Bound by Fred A. Mayo, Richmond, Va." It was a handsome job, indicating the value Jefferson placed upon it.

Incredible as it may seem, it appears to be a fact that neither the first nor the second of these compilations from the gospels was known to Jefferson's grandchildren until after his death, and that then only did they learn from a letter which he addressed to a friend that he was in the habit of reading from them each night before he went to bed. The second and more complete form of the compilation was inherited by his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, and was purchased in 1895 from a descendant for the National Museum in Washington. In 1904 an Act of Congress provided for its exact reproduction by photolithographic process, with binding like the original, and a brief but scholarly introduction by Dr. Cyrus Adler, librarian of the Smithsonian Institute, in a limited edition of 9,000 copies for distribution among members of Congress. The title page reads:

THE
LIFE AND MORALS
OF JESUS OF NAZARETH
EXTRACTED TEXTUALLY FROM THE GOSPELS IN
GREEK, LATIN, FRENCH AND
ENGLISH
BY
THOMAS JEFFERSON
WITH AN INTRODUCTION

WASHINGTON
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
1904

Copies of this most interesting reproduction are now valuable and hard to procure.[4]

This compilation by Jefferson of "The Life and Morals of Jesus" clearly reveals the compiler's view of the founder of Christianity. It begins with Luke III, omitting the birth stories of Matthew and Luke, all ac-

[4] It is also reproduced as an appendix to volume 20 of the *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Lipscomb and Bergh, editors. A cheap edition of the English text, with an inadequate introduction, was published by Wilfred Funk, Inc., New York, 1943, under the misleading title of *Jefferson's Bible*. A fine modern edition of the English text, with an authoritative historical introduction by Henry Wilder Foote, was published in 1951 by the Beacon Press.

counts of miracles, and the resurrection stories, ending the book with the account of the entombment of Jesus. The passages selected are mostly from Matthew and Luke, with a few from the Fourth Gospel, and still fewer from Mark. They have been woven together with great skill to form a consecutive topical narrative bringing together the scattered sayings of Jesus on similar subjects, with a few repetitions, the whole giving a vivid picture of Jesus without any sense that the narrative is disjointed. While the modern New Testament scholar might question the order in which some of the materials are arranged, or, indeed, the method itself, he could hardly produce a more interesting result for the purpose intended. So skillful a compilation could have been made only by a person who knew his Bible very well and who cared a great deal for it. For Jefferson's appreciation of the Bible as great religious literature was not limited to the gospels. When his daughter lay dying, in 1802, he was found reading the Bible under the trees at Monticello; and in his own last illness he read it, as he did Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. He is reported to have been fond of quoting the 15th Psalm. He corresponded with Charles Thomson in 1808 about a new translation of the Septuagint, and "when Samuel Greenhow informed him that there were families in Virginia who did not possess a Bible, and requested a contribution for the Bible Society which he represented, Jefferson replied, in a letter of January

21, 1814, that he was surprised to hear of such a situation and enclosed a gift of fifty dollars."[5]

To say of such a man that "he was a mere amateur, a mere dabbler in religion," and that although he "was undoubtedly not devoid of religious sensibilities [yet] his views were totally undigested, lacking in order and consistency," as does J. Leslie Hall,[6] is a colossal piece of impudence. Jefferson was not, of course, a trained theologian or philosopher, and his strongly scientific turn of mind led him to dismiss with impatience all fine-spun metaphysical subtleties, especially those of medieval scholasticism, which he saw used as an instrument "of tyranny over the mind of man." But his religious opinions were the consistent fruit of careful thinking and patient investigation. His rejection of the traditional dogmas sprang not from ignorance of them but developed as the logical outcome of his scientific training and his belief that "reason is our only guide."

[5] W. D. Gould, "The Religious Opinions of Thomas Jefferson," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 1933-34, vol. XX, p. 204.

[6] J. Leslie Hall, "The Religious Opinions of Thomas Jefferson," *The Sewanee Review*, April 1913, vol. XXI, No. 2, pp. 173, 175.

Jefferson Adopts Unitarian Views in Later Life

THE contents and method of Jefferson's compilation from the gospels make it evident that by the time he had written his *Syllabus* he had become a Unitarian in his beliefs, largely through the influence of Dr. Joseph Priestley, the English Unitarian. Priestley was a confidential friend of Benjamin Franklin, whom he had met in 1764; he had been an outspoken advocate of the cause of the colonies in the troubled period which preceded the Revolution; he was a social and religious radical whose theological writings marked an epoch in English thought; and his eminence as a scientist had gained him membership in the Royal Society. On all these points Jefferson had much in common with him. Always a great reader, Jefferson had read Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, (1782), and *History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ*, (1786), of which he wrote to John Adams (Aug. 22, 1813) "I have read Priestley's books over and over again; and I rest on them . . . as the basis of my own faith."[1] Perhaps these books, which had given him

[1] 13:352.

what were then the most advanced views of New Testament scholarship, had first suggested a compilation of "The Morals of Jesus." At least Jefferson, before undertaking that task himself, had asked Priestley, then in Pennsylvania, to do so, as being better fitted for the work. But Priestley had declined, because of age and infirmity. Priestley had come to this country in 1794 as a refugee from the church-inspired mob which had destroyed his library and scientific laboratory in Birmingham, and Jefferson later (March 21, 1801) wrote to him, "Those who live by mystery and charlatanerie, fearing you would render them useless by simplifying the Christian philosophy—the most sublime and benevolent but most perverted system that ever shone on man—endeavored to crush your well-earned and deserved fame. . . . It is with heartfelt satisfaction that in the first moments of my public action [i.e. immediately after he became President], I can hail you with welcome to our land, tender you the homage of its respect and esteem [and] cover you under those laws which were made for the wise and good like you."[2] Jefferson's regard for Priestley is further attested by another passage in his letter of July 22, 1822, to Benjamin Waterhouse. He wrote, "I am not aware of the peculiar resistance to Unitarianism, which you ascribe to Pennsylvania. When I lived in Philadelphia there was a respectable congregation of that sect, with a meetinghouse and regular service which I attended, and in which

[2] 10:228-29.

Doctor Priestley officiated to numerous audiences. . . . That doctrine has not yet been preached to us [i.e. in Charlottesville]—but the breeze begins to be felt, . . . I am in hopes that some of the disciples of your institution [Harvard Divinity School] will become missionaries to us, . . . A bold and eloquent preacher would be nowhere listened to with more freedom than in this State, nor with more firmness of mind. . . . Missionaries from Cambridge would soon be greeted with more welcome than from the tritheistical school of Andover."[3]

In the article referred to above J. Leslie Hall asserts that Jefferson cannot be classed as a Unitarian because his views were not in accord with those of William Ellery Channing, the great New England exponent of Unitarianism, who was a good deal more conservative at various points than Jefferson. He fails to recognize that Priestley was as truly representative of Unitarianism, in its then somewhat more radical English form, as was Channing, and that, in any case, Unitarianism has never been a fixed system of dogmas but a steadily evolving way of thinking about religion. Channing himself would have been the last to set up his own beliefs as a standard of orthodoxy for Unitarians. Throughout its history Unitarianism has, with few departures, substituted for theological dogmatism an emphasis on three fundamental principles in religion, namely, the freedom of the human mind and spirit; the

[3] 15:391-2.

toleration of the diversities of belief which result from freedom; and the use of reason as the God-given instrument for the attainment of truth. It is needless to point out that Jefferson from his early manhood embraced and steadfastly adhered to these principles.

There are obvious reasons why Jefferson's thought should have been more in accord with Priestley's than with Channing's. Priestley was more than nine years older than Jefferson and had attained distinction, both as a scientist and as a theologian, while Jefferson was still a middle-aged man. Channing, on the other hand, was nearly thirty-eight years younger than Jefferson, and there was no reason why the latter should ever have heard of him until after Channing had delivered his famous "Baltimore Sermon" at the ordination of Jared Sparks in 1819, when Jefferson was 76 years old. That that discourse came to his attention is highly probable, because Jefferson was in correspondence with Sparks about a year later. Some passages in it may well have seemed too conservative for him, but the greater part of it would have been in line with his own thought.

The real question is not the measure of Jefferson's agreement with Channing, but the degree to which Channing was influenced by Jefferson. Channing, after graduation from Harvard in 1798 at the age of 18, had sailed in October of that year from Newport to Richmond, Virginia, where he remained as tutor in the family of David Meade Randolph until July, 1800. Randolph, who had met the young man in Newport, was a leading citizen of Richmond, United States Mar-

shal for Virginia, and was related to Jefferson. Channing, brought up a Federalist, thus found himself immersed in a community which was strongly Democratic, though his employer may perhaps have shared the opinions of his close friend John Marshall, who, himself a Federalist, was opposed to Jefferson on other grounds. Channing must have read the *Notes on Virginia* and heard much about Jefferson's championship of religious freedom and program of social reform. He intensely disliked the slave system that he found in Richmond and on the plantations which he visited—a dislike shared by his employer's wife who wrote of it in terms much like those of Jefferson. And he was depressed by the slight interest in religion, writing in one of his letters, "Christianity is here breathing its last."[4]

Channing's congregation in the Federal Street Church in Boston, where he was ordained on June 1, 1803, was, as a matter of course, strongly Federalist in politics, but throughout his career Channing took a stand for freedom and for social reform which clearly follows Jefferson's. There was no essential difference in their views on slavery, war, education, Christian morals, or, above all, the importance of intellectual freedom. Channing's sermon, "Religion a Social Principle," was influential in bringing about the omission from the Massachusetts Constitution of the article requiring tax support of the churches (1833). His words, "Freedom of opinion, of speech, and of the press is our most

[4] W. H. Channing, *Life of William Ellery Channing*, Boston, 1880, p. 73.

valuable privilege, the very soul of republican institutions, the safeguard of all other rights. . . . There is nothing which tyrants so much dread."[5] sound like an echo of Jefferson. And in his famous passage about the "free mind," including the words, "I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, . . . which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, whilst consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself . . ."[6] we hear Jefferson's sentiments phrased in pulpit oratory. We can hardly avoid the conclusion that Channing had, at an impressionable age, been strongly, though possibly unconsciously, influenced by Jefferson's views, and that his pulpit became the filter by which, separated from political issues, they were made acceptable to Boston Unitarians who perhaps did not quite realize their source.

Jefferson, in his later years, repeatedly acknowledged his own Unitarian position. On June 5, 1822, he wrote to Rev. Thomas Whittemore, a Universalist minister,

> I thank you, Sir, for the pamphlets you have been so kind as to send me, and am happy to learn that the doctrine of Jesus, that there is but one God, is advancing prosperously among our fellow

[5] *Duties of the Citizen in Times of Trial and Danger*, 1812.

[6] *Spiritual Freedom*, 1830.

citizens; had his doctrines, pure as they came from himself, been never sophisticated for unworthy purposes, the whole civilized world would at this day have formed but a single sect. You ask my opinion on the items of doctrine in your catechism. I have never permitted myself to meditate a specified creed. These formulas have been the bane & ruin of the christian church, its own fatal invention which thro' so many ages, made of Christendom a slaughterhouse, and at this day divides it into Casts of inextinguishable hatred to one another, witness the present inter-necine rage of all other sects against the Unitarian. The religions of antiquity had no particular formulas of creed. Those of the modern world none; except those of the religionists calling themselves Christians, and even among these, the Quakers have none, and hence alone the harmony the quiet, the brotherly affections, the exemplary and unschismatising society of the Friends, and I hope the Unitarians will follow their happy example.[7]

Three weeks later, writing to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse of Cambridge on June 26, 1822, he used almost the same words regarding the Unitarian movement in eastern Massachusetts. "Had the doctrines of Jesus been preached always as pure as they came from his lips, the whole civilized world would now have been Christian. I rejoice that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its conscience

[7] *The Early Days of Thomas Whittemore*, Boston, 1859, facsimile letter reproduced opp. p. 293.

to neither kings nor priests, the genuine doctrine of only one God is reviving, and I trust that there is not a *young man* now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian."[8] And on January 8, 1825, he wrote to the same correspondent, "The population of my neighborhood is too slender, and is too much divided into other sects to maintain any one preacher well. I must therefore be contented to be a Unitarian by myself, although I know there are many around me who would become so, if once they could hear the questions fairly stated."[9] These last words give the answer to the statement that Jefferson, though he may have called himself a Unitarian, never became a member of a Unitarian church. There was none in his vicinity which he could join. The nearest were those in Baltimore (organized 1817) and in Washington (organized 1821). Since we have his own testimony that he had attended the Unitarian Church in Philadelphia when Priestley preached there, it is reasonable to assume that if Joseph Priestley had settled in Charlottesville instead of in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, and had lived until after Jefferson's retirement to Monticello, the latter would gladly have joined the church which Priestley might have organized there.

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[8] 15:383-85.

[9] R. J. Honeywell, *The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson,* Cambridge, 1931, p. 92.

Jefferson's Ethical Standards

THROUGHOUT his life Jefferson sought to maintain the high ethical standards of personal character which he had imbibed in his youth. Only the unscrupulous scandalmongers among his opponents accused him of drunkenness, immorality, or financial irregularities. Persons who knew him knew that such charges were false, and respected his self-restraint in language and his fineness of spirit. To his nephew, Peter Carr, he gave advice which reflected his own principles. "Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act. . . . From the practice of the purest virtue, you may be assured that you will derive the most sublime comforts in every moment of life, and in the moment of death."[1] And again, "Your reason is now mature enough to examine religion. . . . Shake off all the fears and servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in the seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of God, because if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear. You will natu-

[1] 5:83.

rally examine first the religion of our country. Read the Bible, then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus. . . . Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness, but the uprightness of the decision."[2]

One of his earlier biographers reports an interesting episode which illustrates both the impression which his character made on those who met him and the amazing range of his encyclopedic mind, which made him the most widely educated American of his day, with few equals in Europe. On one of his periodic trips between Monticello and his retreat at Poplar Forest he stopped overnight at Ford's Tavern. "He was alone, and on alighting was shown into the best room where a very respectable-looking stranger was sitting. The latter, who was a clergyman, soon opened the conversation without having the least idea to whom he was talking. He incidentally introduced the subject of certain mechanical operations which he had recently witnessed. Mr. Jefferson's inquiries and remarks, as he afterwards declared, soon satisfied him that he was conversing with some eminent engineer. Agriculture next came up, and then he made up his mind that Mr. Jefferson was a large farmer. Finally, the topic of religion was broached, and the clergyman became strongly suspicious that his companion was another clergyman, but he confessed that he could not discover to what particular persuasion he leaned! There was something in Mr. Jefferson's presence that did not invite the indulgence of

[2] 6:258-61.

personal curiosity, and no leading questions were put to him. At ten o'clock he retired to bed. The clergyman immediately sought the landlord and asked who his companion had been. 'What, don't you know the Squire?—That was Mr. Jefferson,' was the reply. 'Not President Jefferson?' 'Yes, President Jefferson!' 'Why,' exclaimed the clergyman, 'I tell you that was neither an atheist nor irreligious man—One of juster sentiments I never met with.'"[3]

As old age drew on, Jefferson remained an optimist. "My temperament is sanguine," he wrote to John Adams in 1816, "I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern. My hopes, indeed, sometimes fail; but not oftener than the forebodings of the gloomy."[4] The prospect of death he faced with equanimity. To Mrs. John Adams he wrote, in 1817, "that the being who presides over the world is essentially benevolent" is shown by his "stealing from us, one by one, our faculties for enjoyment, searing our sensibilities, . . . until satisfied and fatigued with this leaden iteration, we ask our *congé*. . . . I heard once a very old friend, who had troubled himself with neither poets nor philosophers, say the same thing in plain prose, that he was tired of pulling off his shoes and stockings at night, and putting them on in the morning."[5]

That he believed in immortality appears evident

[3] H. S. Randall, *Life of Thomas Jefferson,* New York, 1858, III, 345.

[4] 15:56-58.

[5] 15:95-97.

from several statements. To Miles King he wrote, "Following the guidance of a good conscience, let us be happy in the hope that by these different paths we shall all meet in the end. And that you and I may there meet and embrace is my earnest prayer." And to another he wrote, "The term is not distant at which we are to deposit in the same cerement our own errors and suffering bodies, and to ascend in essence to an ecstatic meeting with the friends we have loved and lost, and whom we shall still love and never lose again."[6]

And, finally, there are the simple verses which he wrote on his deathbed as a farewell to his surviving daughter:

"Life's visions are vanished, its dreams are no more;
Dear friends of my bosom, why bathéd in tears?
I go to my fathers, I welcome the shore
Which crowns all my hopes and which buries my cares.
Then farewell, my dear, my lov'd daughter, adieu!
The last pang of life is in parting from you.
Two seraphs[7] await me long shrouded in death;
I will bear them your love on my last parting breath."

His last words were, "I now resign my soul, without fear, to my God: my daughter to my country."

So he died, on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the day on which the Declaration of Independ-

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[6] J. Leslie Hall, *The Religious Opinions of Thomas Jefferson,* op. cit., p. 173.

[7] His wife and his daughter Mary.

ence was signed, while the whole country was celebrating the anniversary.

He left directions that the monument on his grave should bear "the following inscription, and not a word more:

HERE WAS BURIED
THOMAS JEFFERSON
AUTHOR OF THE DECLARATION
OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE,
OF THE STATUTE OF VIRGINIA
FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM,
AND FATHER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA;

by these as testimonials that I have lived I wish most to be remembered." He had given his country a very great part of that spiritual vision which has created what we know as the American dream, for his vision has moulded American ideals more powerfully than that of any other single American.

His memorial shall not pass away,
And his name shall live from generation to generation.

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